

Growing Writers:

Principles and Practices that Nourish

High School Writing Teachers and their Students

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PART ONE:
PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE FOR THE TEACHING OF WRITING

CHAPTER 1:

Thinking about Professional Knowledge: Grounding Practice in Principles

Why this book? The case for principles

“He who floats with the current, who does not guide himself according to higher principles, who has no ideal, no convictions—such a man is a mere article of the world’s furniture—a thing moved, instead of a living and moving being—an echo, not a voice,” wrote the 19th-century Swiss philosopher Amiel in his journal (1885, p. 209). Isn’t it so for teachers of writing? Teaching can sometimes feel like floating on a sea of approaches, philosophies, curricula, strategies, policies and reforms. So many stakeholders have opinions about our work: it seems like every year or two, either *Newsweek*, the *New Yorker*, or the *Atlantic* chooses to run a piece or series with the words “writing crisis” in the title. At social gatherings, when I tell people I teach writing, they tell me how poorly kids write today, or how poorly adults do, and they have strong opinions about what we (I!) ought to be doing differently to fix it (mostly, teach more grammar). States institute writing standards and writing tests, revise them and/or repeal them, then institute new ones in a cyclical fashion. And in schools, it’s common for a new curriculum to be adopted or a new resource to be purchased, to have an initial burst of professional development around it, and then move on to something else just as quickly. All of these ideas about how to teach writing swirl around like foam on the waves, and if we’re not paying attention, we writing teachers can find ourselves bobbing along without direction of our own or, worse, swept up in currents that take our writing instruction in directions we never meant to go.

This book is about centering our teaching on principles. The series of which it is a part, called *Principles in Practice*, expresses both an aspiration and a truth: first, an aspiration that teaching practice can be grounded in principle, centered on ideas that cohere and guide decision making; second, the truth that it is also possible to find ourselves engaging in practice that is just practice: doing things without knowing why we are doing them, or doing things that, though they “work,” can also undermine what we are really trying to do with writers in the long term.

Principles ground and focus our selection and adaptation of practices

I entered the teaching profession with a strong grounding in teaching writing as process, in workshop-organized writing classrooms in which students would choose what to work on and direct themselves through drafting and revision at their own pace, and in which teaching any genre would begin with organic study of actual pieces of writing in that genre. I had learned these principles through university coursework, interaction with teachers who had been connected to the National Writing Project, and deep reading in the professional literature of our field--books like this one, most of which I had found in the shelves of my college library during slow hours at my tutoring job in the writing center. One thing I KNEW I would not do was assign a five-paragraph essay. I would not have students write essays for an unnamed (teacher) reader, either. And I DEFINITELY would not proffer a one-page template for essay planning. What if students’ arguments contained more than one main point? What if they had fewer or more than three reasons, or if the reasons students had to offer for their claims were layered, varying in importance, or drawing upon different sources of evidence? Nope, I would not do it.

Then, of course, I did it. While I did also teach in many of the ways I had hoped I would, after exactly one year I found myself handing out a photocopied essay template I had borrowed from a seasoned colleague. I had started having “timed essays” many Fridays, though not every

Friday, like my colleague next door. And I had a poster on my wall, adapted from materials from Jane Schaeffer, advising students that an essay paragraph should contain a just-so prescribed ratio of “TS, CDs, CMs, and CS”-- that is, a formulaic recipe of Topic Sentence, Concrete Details, Commentary, and Concluding Statements.

Why do we so often do what we wished we never would, or find ourselves teaching in ways that openly clash with some of our dearest held teaching values? My values as a teacher had not changed; nor had my students become more needy or less skilled as writers. The truth was that there were things in those materials that my students and I needed: scaffolding for structuring arguments, tools for planning, and so on. We do first with support what we will later do on our own. As experienced adult writers, we can see how one might start with a formula provided by another, then quickly break the tool and go off on our own when our needs as arguers called for something different. Yet, when I photocopied and handed out worksheets in which students could basically fill in the blanks and produce a cookie-cutter essay, I know I wasn't helping students to work at that level of nuance. Instead, I left my students with two conflicting bases for action as writers: one that said writing was developing a form in light of your own purpose and your audience's needs, and another that said, “here; fill out this form.”

Even the very best teachers I know have had times like these-- times when practices that “worked” to teach a particular skill didn't work together, or didn't fit into the broader vision we had for students. Or times when, after using a strategy or making an assignment again and again over time, we lose the reasons “why” we do a thing and find ourselves doing it because, well, that's what we do in English 9.

What I've discovered over time is that there was a place for those essay-writing supports in my writing instruction, but because I had not examined them thoughtfully in light of the

principles I had identified as important, I wasn't able to bring to students that relationship between the help of the scaffold in the near-term and the longer-term project of becoming an adaptive, flexible writer with skills to acquire new genres.

Principles make our instruction more coherent and intentional

Even when we're feeling strong and grounded in our practice, paying explicit attention to the principles that we teach from and within is a useful and sustaining practice. Principles offer a set of intentional, powerful lenses through which to view and reflect upon our own practice as teachers. And the benefits of reflection are by now well known, helping teachers to gain deeper critical insight into their own practice (Boud, 2001; Boud et al., 1985; Gay & Kirkland, 2003).

The principles don't only benefit us, however. They also help us to make our instruction more coherent and purposeful for our students. Research shows that when lessons are more coherently focused around clear goals and principles, students learn more (Erickson, 2002; Guthrie et al., 2000; Seidel et al., 2005). And it makes sense, doesn't it, that when activities are connected to clear purposes, and fit together with other activities and their purposes over time, that students can better make use of them for learning?

When I think about coherence, I always think about two classrooms in a study I was involved with (Whitney et al., 2008). Both teachers were working with similar kinds of kids in similar schools, and both teachers were using the same district-provided materials, in this case a set of reading and writing lessons centered around Amelia Earhart. The basic activities and sequence of instruction were the same for these two teachers--activities to support invention, planning, drafting, and revision--and both of them were very good at working with students through these activities. However, one teacher often stepped back to place the activities within a bigger picture. She articulated why a particular strategy was good to use, beyond that

assignment. She always made ties between what was happening now and what might happen in the future or in other writing situations, when the same moves would be called for. She even engaged the students in thinking together about why Amelia Earhart was someone worth learning about. The nuts and bolts of this teacher's instruction were basically identical to that of the other teacher, but the framing was clear and coherent. Activities had a place in a broader set of ideas that drove her teaching and that also powered the students' engagement in what they had been asked to do. And when the students wrote, they had a clear sense of why they were doing so: beyond the fact that a teacher had asked them to write, they had things they wanted to say about Amelia Earhart and a sense of who they might say those things to.

This is the power of principles. Principles tie instructional moves together into bigger frames. Principles give activities a "why." Principles offer both teachers and students a way to hook into a bigger picture that unifies and gives significance to what we are doing.

Principles make our practice shareable

What's more, keying our teaching practice to specific principles makes it shareable. Maybe having your ninth graders write and produce video PSAs about water quality, for example, is local to your specific teaching context, where water quality is a pressing issue and where PSAs are specifically called for in a district curriculum document. So, the details of that specific teaching sequence in and of themselves may not be directly useful to a colleague who teaches, say, fiction writing in grade 11 in a distant location. However, the details of that specific teaching practice become *very* useful (and provocative!) to that teacher when they're offered not as an account of one particular assignment but as an example of working with students as they write for authentic audiences according to their different purposes. Perhaps one teacher is having students craft PSAs for an audience of local citizens, and another is having students craft

informational books about middle school for rising sixth graders currently attending elementary school--these specifics come together and become mutually informing when they are linked by a shared principle, in this case “Writing grows out of many purposes.”

Clearly identified principles are the language--and result--of a lively, ongoing conversation among teachers of writing. The principles featured in this book aren't one teacher's intuition or one colleague's version of “what works”; they reflect years of experimentation and collaboration by teachers and of more systematic research and scholarship by both classroom teachers and other educators. In other words, naming and claiming these principles connects us to a long tradition of other teachers of writing who have struggled together to understand the very things we are contending with, and also to whose discussion we ourselves might have something to add.

Take the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), for example, whose press is publishing this book and whose members crafted the statement of principles upon which this book is focused. NCTE was founded in 1911 , and it was in that first meeting that the *English Journal* (first published in 1912) was founded also (National Council of Teachers of English, n.d.). From its beginning, this community of teachers has gathered to talk about issues literacy teachers face--and has made the effort to share thinking via publications, in-person meetings, and, later, online resources and interactions. Each of these texts or events does not stand alone; taken together, they represent a conversation. Through that conversation, some core principles have emerged.

The conversation wouldn't be much of a conversation if people just asserted their own ideas without learning and linking to the ideas of those who have come before. Think about how you talk at a party. You don't walk into a crowded room, take off your coat, clear your throat,

and begin immediately to give a speech. No, you take as a given that people who are already there are already talking about interesting things. So you hang up your coat, maybe greet a few people you know, and edge up to a group whose conversation is in midstream. You get a sense of what they are saying, catch up on the thread of talk, before you jump in to add your own ideas. And when you add those ideas, you have some expectation that they'll be listened to and responded too. Others will build off of what you say, maybe to disagree or maybe to add on or explore an implication of what you said. And by the end of the night, you and the other folks you've been talking with all know a bit more than you did when you came in, or at least can ask some new questions. This is only possible because you talked together, taking turns and threading together various comments with shared themes that served as through-lines for the conversation. Shared principles of professional knowledge are like that--they are through-lines for our shared conversation that allow our wonderings, observations, and insights to be talked about outside just our own heads. The guy who interjects a bunch of non-sequiturs at the party isn't participating in the same way.

Principles provoke inquiry and reflection

One of my favorite things about clarifying principles for practice is the way they provoke and focus my questions as I teach. A principle like "writing is social" leads me to "how can I develop writing partnerships for my students?" And systematic inquiry enriches teaching with new information and insight that we can put directly back into teaching (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001; Fleischer, 1995; Whitney et al., 2008).

One way principles provoke and support inquiry is by making our questions better. Instead of asking, "Why is this not working?" or "why is this student not learning?" we can ask, "What processes are students engaging in here, and what resources do they need to succeed?" Or

“How can I better support this student?” Without thoughtful questions, it’s easy to fall into the trap of deficit perspectives that harm students and stop us from doing our best work.

Principles for Teaching Writing: About PKFTW

This book, of course, isn’t about just any principles; it is grounded in the set of principles laid out in the position statement Professional Knowledge for the Teaching of Writing, adopted by NCTE in 2016. So, let me share a bit of the history behind that document and its meaning as a statement of shared grounding principles for practice, developed, assembled, vetted and articulated by the professional community of which you as readers, I as author and editor, and the teachers who contributed later chapters are all members.

The history of PKFTW is really two histories: one, the history of the document, and the other, the history of the ideas in it. First, a brief history of the document: NCTE has often taken formal positions on a range of issues inside and outside of the classroom, and in 2004 the statement Beliefs About Teaching Writing was adopted by the NCTE Executive Committee. Their origin story goes like this: in 2002, the NCTE Executive Council decided to embark on a two-year focus on writing, discerning NCTE’s positions on writing and what actions the Council might choose to take relative to writing. A Writing Study Group was formed, consisting of Rebecca Sipe (Chair), Randy Bomer, David Christensen, Doug Hesse, Rudy Sharpe, and Paul Bodmer. One product of that group’s work was Beliefs About the Teaching of Writing (BATW), which was presented to the leadership of NCTE and approved by its members, ultimately adopting the document as the official position on the teaching of writing in November 2004. More than a decade later, the NCTE Executive Committee engaged a wider review and refresh of existing policy statements, updating some and sunsetting others. This provided an opportunity to incorporate new research into the statement as well as make it responsive to changing

contexts, though the basic ideas in the document remained consistent. A committee was appointed to examine and update BFTW, and the product of that group was eventually adopted as PKFTW.

The history of the ideas that comprise PKFTW is of course much more complex. The next chapter will present a bit of the background and support for each of PKFTW's ten principles; here, I want to step back a bit to offer a perspective on the community discernment process by which these ideas gain currency, are vetted, and become shared beliefs of a professional community. That process is less formalized than was the creation of the actual PKFTW document, but it matters nonetheless because it shows that the principles we come to identify as a community aren't just the opinions of a few powerful people, not fads or the educational flavor-of-the month.

We gain professional knowledge from formal and informal inquiry, in and out of the classroom. So, some of our shared professional knowledge comes from teachers who develop wonderings from their own daily teaching practice, who systematically investigate those, and who then make changes in practice from what they find as well as sharing their learning with other teachers. This movement and source of professional knowledge we call teacher research or practitioner research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992, 2009). Its history is rich, dating to the beginnings of research on writing, and having roots in the work of progressive educators like John Dewey and his colleagues in the USA as well as others like Lawrence Stenhouse in the UK later on. Teacher research as a needed and legitimate source of knowledge for practice grew in influence in the USA largely through the National Writing Project (e.g. Maclean & Mohr, 1999) whose teachers-teaching-teachers philosophy fit well with teacher research and whose teacher-leaders rightly perceived that there really was not much empirical information available from any

source about what worked for writing instruction in the K-12 classroom from *any* source.

Teacher research also took hold in teacher networks and organizations serving teachers such as the Bread Loaf School of English (whose DeWitt Wallace/Readers' Digest-funded large-scale network of rural teachers included teacher research as a core component) (Goswami & Stillman, 1987). NCTE and its members have been ever-present through these developments (Fleischer, 1995; Stock, 2001; Stock, 2005), and the organization has long supported teacher research, providing venues for its publication through its journals and conferences, hosting countless conference sessions dedicated to supporting teacher research or sharing its results.

Meanwhile, knowledge that confirms, extends, and at times challenges what we can learn directly from practice also comes from qualitative and quantitative studies originating outside the classroom (but almost always carried out with insight from teacher partners). This work is usually led by university faculty. These researchers are NCTE members too. NCTE as an organization has supported this kind of knowledge generation for the teaching of writing through its research-focused journals such as *Research in the Teaching of English* and *English Education*, through the NCTE Research Foundation and other research initiatives such as CEE (now ELATE) Research Initiative. It also encourages and recognizes this strand of research through mentorship and dissemination structures like the Ramon Veal Seminar and the Research Strand at the NCTE Annual Convention, through which proposals go through a research-specific peer review process before approval for the convention program.

All of this is to say that the knowledge expressed in PKFTW is *our* knowledge. It is not just someone's opinion, and it's not just the practice of another teacher. It isn't new, or fashionable. It has been vetted by our community, not only in the process of the formal drafting of the PKFTW document but more importantly (and much more extensively!) through the

vetting and peer review that goes into research collaborations, peer review, reviewing for publications, and putting one's ideas out in front of a conference or roundtable. These are not the ideas of faraway experts, and they are not ideas picked up outside and imposed on our teaching by policymakers from outside. They are *our* ideas.

In this Book

This means that PKFTW gives us at least these four gifts: It gives us a source of ideas for practice when we need ideas. It gives us a reflective filter for enhancing and deepening the practices we already work with. It gives us an evaluative filter for evaluating practice suggested (or mandated) by others. And, it gives us a place to stand in the face of bad ideas for practice or when defending practices we know are good for student writers.

The rest of this book offers a chance to think through this powerful set of principles, so that you can make use of them. It is a chance not only to consider principles on the abstract level, but to see and hear from other teachers exactly what these ideas look like in real writing classrooms with real kids. Along the way, side boxes will invite you to reflect and think further about applications to your own teaching every day.

In Chapter 2, we'll unpack each of the ten principles laid out in PKFTW. Chapters 4-9 are invited contributions from teachers of high school writers, who have spent some time thinking about what these principles look like in their own practice and have described those so that we can think together about them. Chapter 10 backs up again to a bigger picture, adding all of this up into a discussion of professional knowledge and how we grow it, helping you form a clear plan going forward. Chapter 11 is an annotated bibliography, written—not in academic prose, but in teacher-friendly language—to encourage you to keep exploring, questioning, and reconsidering as you, too, enter this conversation.